

The Stairwell Gospel
Sermon at Springfield Presbyterian Church
Easter III - April 18, 2021

Psalm 133

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!

It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes.

It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the Lord ordained his blessing, life forevermore.

John 20:18-31

Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

It is so good to be with you on this spring morning, albeit in a strange way during a strange time.

Well, we made it through Holy Week, and have entered Eastertide. That's right... it's a whole season of looking for new life and figuring out how to live with the resurrection.

Two weeks ago, we had resurrection in our grasp. The story didn't end in death. And thank God. But this week, reality has settled back in. And we are called to find and proclaim new life in a world that is tired, and messy, and still full of crucifixion.

After a week with the women by the tomb, we turn around and with a muffled thud, find the disciples have locked the doors on us.

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Some years ago, I was sitting in the back corner of a lecture hall, staring furiously at the professor at the front of the room. I was just finding my way through the discipline of theology, and had found refuge among some women in my department, who, though it didn't know it at the time, were slowly shaping me into a feminist theologian.

This professor though was not a feminist. For a while, we had tolerated one another, until one day during a discussion on the Trinity, it all fell apart. I disagreed with something the author we were discussing had said. Halfway through my defense of what a monastic leader named Macrina told us about the Trinity and communal salvation, the professor, with a pitying smile and a shake of his head, raised his hand to interrupt me: "Miss Lewellen, you will please refer only to real theologians in my classroom. Leave your women outside."

In this place of power, in this place of knowledge, inside this hallowed university hall, more than half of the knowledge I had was suddenly disqualified. I was disqualified from being there. I was a woman. Did he not know that?

It vibrated through my bones, "Leave your women outside."

INSIDE THE ROOM

For a long time, when I heard the story of Thomas told, I heard a tale of what happened to eleven men *inside* one small room.

It was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked. Inside the room, ten men gathered out of fear. And for good reason. The eleventh was missing. The twelfth was dead. Their leader was gone. Inside the room, I imagine that they sat huddled together, wondering how long it would take for word to get back to the religious authorities that Jesus' body was missing, and telling each other it would be better to stay indoors.

And then, as if the day couldn't get more disorienting, Jesus came to see them, let them touch his wounds, spoke with them, breathed on them, sent them out, but it wasn't enough. Because they

stayed inside the room. Later, the eleventh, Thomas, shows up. He doesn't believe the stories told, and insists on seeing and touching Jesus' wounds for himself. A perfectly reasonable thing to need in the midst of the shock of the last few days.

And so he does. A week later, he touches Jesus' body and declares that he believes Jesus is alive. Jesus' closing statement to Thomas is the phrase in this story that haunts our theology the most. "Have you believed because you've seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Here, Jesus supposedly comes back and reveals that true faith, the kind of faith that will earn his blessing, begs for no explanation, that real faith comes without seeing or touching.

But if we think about this scene too hard, it stops making sense.

For one thing, there isn't anyone who hasn't seen Jesus post-resurrection in this story. Who could be called blessed here if not seeing him is the first test of true belief in his resurrection? And another thing, I can't figure out why Jesus would scold Thomas for wanting to see him after Jesus showed up not once but twice the week before. In this same gospel, Jesus was so intent on Mary Magdalene recognizing him that he'd stayed in the garden and called her name, so intent on the disciples knowing him that he stayed in the room the week before, allowing them to see him and touch his wounds. We were overjoyed about seeing Jesus last week. But now, it seems Thomas is being scolded for doing the thing we were so excited about seven days ago by the tomb and in the Upper Room.

"Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe," Jesus shouts to the room of followers after he made sure they had seen him.

So unless Jesus is being a huge jerk, which is not without precedent, I think there's something else happening here.

Our tradition and classic interpretations of this story only give us half of what's going on because our tradition remains stuck with the terrified disciples in the Upper Room.

I think we can only see into the strangeness and holiness of this moment if we step out for a moment. Literally, just to the other side of the door, where they've left the women outside.

OUTSIDE THE ROOM

It was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked. And though the room was silent and filled with fear, outside the room, the stairwell was alive with noise and movement. Her fist knocking on the door, I can hear Mary's words still echoing breathlessly as she had arrived from the garden, "I have seen the Lord! And he is alive."

Just before the door shut on the Upper Room that day, Mary met Jesus in the garden. She found him, didn't recognize him, then did, and embraced him. She, in that moment in the garden, became the first to reach out and touch resurrection.

From there, Jesus sends her to spread this good news to the other followers.

Mary runs to the disciples and declares, "I have seen the Lord."

And then we lose her. The line I included in the reading for this morning is usually cut off from the Thomas story, but really, it's all one single story telling about what happened on that first day, connected by the thread of Mary's declaration. But for whatever reason - patriarchy or a wild misunderstanding of how doors and walls work - she vanishes entirely from interpretation and imagination. As we roll into the second half of John's Easter story, they leave the women outside.

They are so consumed by fear that they erase her from the story. But she's still there, I imagine, wait just outside.

Suddenly there's a noise inside the room. The disciples encounter what Mary had witnessed that morning: Jesus is alive. They rejoice, the Spirit melts some of the tension out of the air, Jesus reminds them that they have authority and tells them they need to start moving around outside the room.

Even after his appearance, his assurance, his blessing, his spirit all fill the room, they choose to stay inside the room.

And still they leave the women outside.

Later that night, Thomas comes in late, barreling up the stairs past Mary. The ten others tell him everything, "We have seen the Lord! And so has Mary." But Thomas is still afraid. He still doesn't trust them. "No," he says. "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and put my hand in his side, I will not believe." And so they sit there inside the room.

A week later they are still there, and again Jesus speaks to the disciples inside the room. This time, Thomas touches what he needs to touch, sees what he needs to see. Jesus says to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Centuries of insistence that it is by faith in intangible things alone that we know anything about God blocks up our ears as we listen to Jesus. The instinct to put the women out of our mind blurs our comprehension.

"Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen me and yet have come to believe."

When I sit with Mary, I can hear him anew. Jesus I think isn't asking us to close our eyes, isn't asking us to believe without anything to hold onto. After all, he puts Thomas' hand in his side. Jesus is asking us to believe what he sent Mary to say, what he showed his disciple that first

morning, what Mary said and knew and held: that he was alive. He is asking us to accept as truth, the word of a woman in the stairwell.

“Have you believed because you’ve seen me?” Jesus laments. Why did you need to Thomas? Your sister told you everything you needed to know to believe this without seeing me yourself. “Have you believed because you’ve seen me?” Why did you not trust your closest companions? Blessed are you who have not seen me and still came to believe. Blessed are you who embraced the word of a woman without having to confirm it “just in case” she was crazy. Blessed are those who have not seen but still believed because they trusted their sister, the one I send with news of new life.

“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen me and still came to believe.”

This *is* a story about faith and what we are called to do. But it isn’t *really* a story about Thomas doubting Jesus. This is a story about Thomas doubting Mary. Really, it’s about all the disciples doubting Mary. Thomas is only called the Doubter, I suspect, because also he doubts the men. This is a story about the disciples struggling, even refusing to believe the word of a woman though she’d held in her arms what they so desperately wanted to know. This is a story about truth and who we trust to tell it. About good news, and who we trust to proclaim it.

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.

STAIRWELL GOSPEL

Maybe a month after our argument, my professor approached me on the street to say that he said he was worried about me. “If you don’t work inside the walls of tradition,” he told me, “you will never survive in the church.”

And in some congregations, he would probably be right. But for most of us, what a thriving church looks and feels like is changing. For the flourishing church, gone are the days of shut doors that bar some of our neighbors from entry. Gone are the days of closed off sanctuaries and too much weight put on membership rolls. The church’s imagination, which for so long has been limited to the inside of our buildings, is starting to blossom again. Imaginations that had been so intensely focused on the activity inside our walls, are starting to wonder again how to be the church without and outside our buildings. A thriving church knows her neighbors, and treats them like partners and leaders and friends instead of outsiders or recipients of our good will or missional dollars. A thriving church is small and mighty. A thriving church leaves her doors open until the line between church and community all but disappears. A thriving church listens and takes a risk even when things feel scary. A thriving church doesn’t let Mary inside from the stairwell; it follows her out the door.

While I’m sure there is something good for Thomas and the disciples, I think the good news we need today, is the good news for Mary Magdalene. For the one who did what she was called to do and persisted even when fear locked the door on her.

It is tempting for those of us who cringe at Mary's exclusion, for those who know the sting of a door slammed shut, to think that good news for Mary is that Thomas might recognize her authority and let her inside - that she might get a seat at the table inside the room.

That is certainly what I thought I wanted in that lecture hall. And again what I thought I needed as the denomination decided whether it would ordain queer people like me. I wanted in. I wanted to be allowed inside the room.

But listening to Jesus with Mary's ears shows us another way, really, another world. Because Mary knew and Jesus knew that what the disciples were looking for was never inside.

This is what Mary Magdalene knew. Like any good post-resurrection story, new life was outside the whole time. It was never in the tomb or in the upper room. It was outside - in the garden, on the road to Emmaus, out on the water, out in the stairwell. New life can find us behind closed doors, but it did not start there, and will not let us stay.

This is the stairwell gospel, the gospel according to people left outside. Outside is where new life is waiting for us when we find our courage to follow the Mary Magdalene's of the world out.

How different would our world be if those exiled to the stairwell were the ones who lead? If we didn't exile parts of ourselves in order to gain access to positions of power? How wild would our faith communities become if we relinquished our Thomas-like fear and opened the doors? If we stopped wondering how to convince more neighbors to come inside, and instead wondered how we could leave our building more often? If we led like Mary or if we searched for her beyond the boundaries of our walls - physical or otherwise?

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. Blessed are those who proclaim what they know is true from the stairwell that we might come to believe in this new and impossible life.

Amen.